## Writing a Literature Review – A Brief Introduction

This guidance has been complied using various sources including resources from the University of Leicester, the University of Toronto and the University of Melbourne. This guidance is aimed primarily at the scope of a Literature Review that would be found in an EPQ.

The number of sources that you include in your literature review and your references will differ from the number of sources you read. It is expected that you read to identify areas of interest and to then further refine them. The items that you read to help initiate an area of interest may include news stories found on websites including BBC New, The Guardian. These are useful starting points but wouldn't be included in your final literature review or reference list. This means that you should read more sources than you include in the literature review. As a general rule of thumb, reading twenty sources and including ten to twelve would in, most cases, produce a robust literature review.

## A. What is a literature review?

A literature review is an objective summary of published research relevant to the research focus of the EPQ. A literature review can also set out the scope of your research area – the aspects you will and will not be considering and why. It is not enough to simply show what others in your field have discovered, you need to review the work of others critically. An effective review analyses and synthesizes material and should meet some of the following requirements:

- Compares and contrasts different authors' views on an issue
- Groups authors who draw similar conclusions,
- Criticises aspects of methodology,
- Notes areas in which authors are in disagreement,
- Identifies patterns or trends in the literature
- Highlights gaps in previous research or questions left unanswered
- Shows how your study relates to previous studies,
- Shows how your study relates to the literature in general,
- Concludes by summarising what the literature says.

A good literature review needs a clear line of argument and should be written in a formal, academic style. You should be objective and respectful of others' opinions; you should not be asserting personal opinions or using emotive language.

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The structure of the literature review will depend on your own EPQ. Ultimately what you will need to do is group together and compare the different opinions of various writers on certain topics that are relevant to your research area. You should not describe in turn what one writer/ piece of research says and then move on to the next writer, and another, and so on. Your structure should be set out by themes, variables, theories or perspectives (see below). Within each of these sections, you would then discuss what the different literature argues, remembering to link this to your own research focus. At the end of the literature review you should include a summary of what the literature implies, which again links to your hypothesis or main question.

In general terms a literature review will include:

1. Introduction
2. Main body
3. Conclusion

**B.  Structure**

1.  Introduction

- A concise definition of the topic
- The scope of the literature being reviewed – what has been included and excluded
- Any relevant comments on the availability of sources

2.  Main Body

- This section may be organised in a number of ways including;
  - Chronologically; although be careful not just to list items; you need to write critically, not simply descriptively
  - By theme; this is useful if there are several strands within your topic that can logically be considered separately before being brought together;
  - By sector e.g.: political background, methodological background, geographical background, literary background;
  - By development of ideas; this could be useful if there are identifiable stages of idea development that can be looked at in turn;
  - By some combination of the above, or by another structure you create

There are many possibilities, you need to establish one that will best fit the 'story' you are telling of the reason for your study. Once you have decided on your structure you need to outline it for your reader.

- Each work needs to be evaluated. It is important to identify inconsistencies, omissions and errors as well as accuracies, depth and relevance
- Use linking phrases and transitions to connect sources (see below)

3.  Conclusion

- Here you should summarise the key findings of the review
- You should also justify your research, re-state your idea, linked to the findings of your literature review

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## C. Writing tips

- Linking phrases

The use of linking words will be important. If you are grouping together writers with similar opinions, you would use words or phrases such as:

*Similarly, in addition, also, again*

If there is disagreement between sources you could use:

*Nevertheless, conversely, on the other hand, however*

- Presenting and discussing literature

When introducing someone's opinion, don't use 'says', but instead use an appropriate verb which more accurately reflects this viewpoint, such as 'argues', 'claims', 'states', 'suggests' or 'asserts'. Use the present tense for general opinions and theories, or the past when referring to specific research or experiments for example:

*'Although Trescothick (2001) argues that attack is the best form of defence, Boycott (1969) asserts the value of a good forward defensive stroke….'*

*'In a field study carried out in Sydney, Warne (1999) found that English fruit rarely thrives during an Australian summer…….'*

- Tables

As well as using tables to display numerical data, tables can be useful within a literature review when you are comparing other kinds of material. For example, you could use a table to display the key differences between two or more:

- Possible theoretical perspectives
- Possible methods
- Sets of assumptions
- Sample profiles
- Possible explanations

The table format can make the comparisons easier to understand than it they were listed within the text. It can also be a check for yourself that you have identified enough relevant differences. An omission will be more obvious within a table, where it would appear as a blank cell, than it would be within text.

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- Plagiarism

  Plagiarism is the use of someone else's words or ideas, and passing them off as your own. This can happen accidentally when your notes are muddled with quotes from literature and your own ideas and you incorporate the ideas and quotes of others in your writing as yours. For more information see: https://www.york.ac.uk/integrity/plagiarism.html

  A practical way to help you avoid accidentally forgetting to reference someone else's work is to routinely record short extracts of text verbatim i.e.: using the exact words of the author, rather than putting the idea in your own words. You will need to put quotation marks around the exact quote, and note the page number on which it appears.

## D. Referencing

Detailed guidance can be found at the University of York's Academic Integrity pages. In short, choose a referencing convention (Chicago, Harvard) and stick to it:

https://www.york.ac.uk/integrity/referencing.html

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## E. Final Checklist - Reviewing your review

Some useful questions to consider:

- Have you indicated the purpose of the review?
- Is the scope of the review reasonable?
- Why did you include some of the literature and exclude others?
- What is the balance between description and comment?
- Have you missed out any important dimension of the argument, or literature?
- Is the material presented in the most effective order?
- Have you been sufficiently critical of theories, design or methodological issues?
- Have you indicated when results/ideas were conflicting or inconclusive and discussed possible reasons?
- Are there places where the reader is left with unanswered questions?
- Have you explained to the reader the relevance of each piece of evidence?
- Is there any material that is interesting but which does not contribute to the development of the argument?
- Have you explained adequately the justification for this research approach/topic/question?
- Are the reference complete and up to date?
- How effective is my linking of all the elements?

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